

Plan B for Libya

Written by Gal Luft
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The September 20 deadline for establishing a unity government in war-torn Libya ahead of the UN General Assembly meeting came and went, and reconciliation between Libya's internationally recognized parliament based in Tobruk and the rival leadership, the new General National Congress (GNC), in Tripoli, was nowhere on the horizon. Anyone who is surprised by this just hasn't been paying attention.

Reuniting the Libyan militias has been the West's only endgame for Libya since the oil-rich country slid into a civil war following the 2011 removal of Muammar Qaddafi by a select coalition of NATO countries led by Britain, France, and the United States. But this outcome does not seem to be getting any closer. Indeed, things have gotten much worse.

During the 12 months in which the UN Special Envoy for Libya, Spanish Diplomat Bernardino Leon, labored to hammer out a deal, the country became a destination for ISIS fighters taking advantage of the chaos on the ground. The fact that a UN arms embargo prevents weapons transfers to either the Tobruk or Tripoli governments means that ISIS fighters have a distinct advantage: Where two fight, a third may win out. In June, ISIS temporarily took over the city of Sirte on the coast of the Mediterranean, and several days ago a group of their suicide terrorists attacked Libya's international airport in Tripoli, killing three people.

To make matters worse, the lack of functioning government and border controls had enabled many thousands of migrants from North and Sub-Saharan Africa to cross the Mediterranean into Europe, exacerbating Europe's migrant crisis.

Neither the continuation of ISIS's expansion in Libya nor the persistence of the flow of African migrants are options the U.S. government and those of the European Union can tolerate. It is time to thank Leon for his noble efforts and recognize the reality that the only realistic solution one can aspire to at the moment is the division of Libya into two independent national entities.

Following Leon's maneuvering in Libya over the past year, one always got the false impression that a deal to stabilize the country was just around the corner. A draft proposal on forming a national unity government would be put forth; the two sides would stall in approving it; they would then suggest amendments which, in turn, would get rejected; and public protests would then lead the rival factions to back down. And so it went, and so it goes. The appearance of progress when in fact there is none has served as eyewash as Libya has fallen ever deeper into chaos—and as the flow of migrants through Libya to Europe intensifies.

The failure of the Leon doctrine is not a testament to his less-than-stellar mediation skills but rather a reflection of a far deeper reality: the inability of the rival factions to accept the concept

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of shared governance over the country. Indeed, they don't even genuinely recognize the notion that Libya is a country.

What has complicated the West's efforts to reunite Libya is the senseless characterization of the Tripoli government as "Islamist." In our day and age there is no better way to delegitimize a group than to label it as Islamist. This is exactly what happened to the GNC. While the Tobruk government enjoyed broad international recognition and free access to international forums, only Turkey and Qatar recognize the Tripoli government, and its leaders cannot even travel abroad freely. But the notion that Tripoli is more Islamist than the other groups vying for control over Libya—not the least other groups and regimes throughout the Middle East that the West is happy to embrace—is bogus. When it comes to Islamist tendencies, all tribes are more or less cut from the same cloth. By not recognizing those who are in command of most of the country's institutions and strategic assets—paradoxically, the salaries of Libya's diplomatic staff representing the Tobruk government all over the world are drawn from the coffers in Tripoli—and who also contributed their fair share to Qaddafi's removal, the West is undermining any chance for stabilization. Equally delusional is the idea toyed with by some American and European operatives of installing a Western backed Libyan expat who would miraculously rally the tribes behind him. Wasn't the Ahmed Chalabi mirage in Iraq enough?

Now, when the deadline for reunification is passed, it is time to consider a Plan B for Libya. This plan should draw from the country's history. Back in the early 20th century the territory of today's Libya was split into three self-governing regions: Cyrenaica, which was located in eastern Libya, more or less in the region controlled today by the Tobruk government, and Tripolitania, situated today in some of the area controlled by the GNC. The third was Fezzan, which was and still is an inhospitable desert region in the southwest sparsely populated by Arab and Berber tribes. Some version of this arrangement, which lasted until 1963 during the reign of King Idris I, should be considered today.

Washington and Brussels should first recognize the Tripoli government and treat it as a legitimate party. They should then work to hammer out an agreement with the factions to form an orderly division of Libya into two separate entities, under the condition that these two will work—separately and jointly—to combat the spread of ISIS in North Africa. They also need to cooperate in active measures to create a virtual wall along Libya's coastline to thwart additional migration into Europe. To this end the Libyan navy and coast guard should be reconstituted, and the arms embargo should be gradually lifted to allow security forces to effectively take on ISIS.

In his recent UN speech, President Obama boasted of America's achievement in Libya. But he admitted, "Our coalition could have, and should have, done more to fill a vacuum left behind." And then he somewhat incongruously promised, "In such efforts, the United States will always do our part." Thinking again on how to fill the vacuum, Obama should take note of a 2006 proposal by the senior Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—namely, his Vice President, Joe Biden. Then-Senator Biden proposed that Iraq be divided into three separate regions—Kurdish, Shi'a, and Sunni. At the time the U.S. government and its allies were still consumed by dreams of forming a democratic heaven on the Tigris, and the idea was dismissed. A decade later it no longer sounds so bizarre. Let us hope that, when it comes to

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Libya, it will take the West less time to recognize that sometimes a divided country is better than a broken and hopeless one.

Gal Luft is co-director of the [Institute for the Analysis of Global Security \(IAGS\)](#) .

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